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Mobility and professional networks in academia: an exploration of the obligations of presence

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Abstract

This article explores the obligations of presence behind work-related mobility for academics in internationalizing higher education systems. By further developing John Urry's concept of 'meetingness', the article reveals how academics depend on corporeal and virtual mobility to create and maintain a networked professional life outside their own institution, which is crucial in the context of changing work conditions. Our insights are drawn from original qualitative research (42 interviews) in a Flemish and Danish context. The data reveal obligations of presence associated with an interrelated mix of functionality, and the construction of dense and sparse social networks that together support career success and work at the frontiers of academic knowledge. Despite the now well-recognised costs of corporeal mobility, obligations of presence result in virtual and corporeal mobility coexisting, rather than the former substituting for the latter. Virtual mobility is mainly used when conflicting obligations of presence exist, and as a means of sustaining networks over time given the processual nature of meetingness, rather than as a means to reduce levels of corporeal mobility.

Keywords

Academic mobility, meetingness, mobility obligations, internationalization, social networks

Introduction

As higher education systems internationalize, mobility has become an important aspect of work for academics[1], in the Global North in particular (Parker and Weik 2014). Academics across all career stages are travelling around the globe to attend conferences and meetings of peers within/between their disciplines to engage in project work, to deliver guest lectures and speeches, etc. (Lassen 2006; Storme et al. 2013). Early career researchers are increasingly inclined or expected to undertake a research stay abroad at 'places of excellence' (Ackers 2008; Jöns 2011), and senior academics are seconded to campuses overseas (Salt and Wood 2014) or assigned to multiple institutions at once, which generates even more international mobility.

However, corporeal mobility is a costly practice in terms of time, money and effort, and it is 'burdened' with significant social and environmental costs (Beaverstock et al. 2009). Socially, mobility can be a source of stress and frustration for the traveller and his/her family and can also impinge on work/life balance (Espino et al. 2002; Gustafson 2006). With respect to the environment, corporeal mobility has been linked with high carbon emissions and therefore significant contributions to climate change (Gössling and Peeters 2007; Lassen 2010; Nevins 2014; Urry 2010;). In addition, it has been argued that corporeal mobility has an ambiguous relationship with career mobility (Dickmann and Harris 2005) and continuing gender inequality (Ackers 2008; Leemann 2010; Parker and Weik 2014). These high costs and inequalities make scholars question the value and necessity of repeated corporeal mobility (Ackers 2008), especially when innovative communication technologies—referred to here as virtual mobility—seem to offer ways to reconcile these costs (Urry 2002).

Empirical studies that explore what compels and motivates academics to travel are however very rare, especially in terms of analysis of the complex interplay between corporeal and virtual mobility (Ackers 2010). This article seeks to help fill this research gap by drawing on a novel case study which further develops the concept of 'meetingness' for academics in internationalizing higher education systems (Urry 2003; 2004a). In doing so, we are not so much concerned with the question of how virtual mobility can substitute for corporeal mobility; rather, we aim to contribute to the understanding of how corporeal and virtual mobility are integrated over time (Aguiléra et al. 2012; Haynes 2010). To this end, we draw upon qualitative research at Ghent University (Belgium) and Aalborg University (Denmark), where a total of 42 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with academic Faculty staff. In doing so, the article contributes to a growing body of literature on

the broader concept of business mobility (Aguiléra 2008; Beaverstock et al. 2009; Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Gustafson 2014; Jones 2007) by making two substantive contributions.

First, the article reveals the importance of mobility for academic 'network capital' (Urry 2004b), the different types of sparse and dense networks produced through different forms of meetingness, and the different roles in the academic labour process. This highlights the importance of the nexus between mobility, network production and reproduction, and the way professional networks, in addition to the inter-firm networks predominantly focussed on in existing business travel literatures, are crucial to flows of knowledge. Second, the article uses insights from the mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007) to offer new conceptualizations of work-related mobility. We argue that a perspective on "meetingness" as an ongoing process is particularly valuable in knowledge-intensive sectors, because of the socially embedded nature of economic activity (Granovetter 1985; Yeung 2005). This allows us to consider the way corporeal and virtual mobility cooperate in academic knowledge work, and in particular the way virtual mobility allows conflicting obligations of presence to be served, rather than corporeal mobility and thus reducing detrimental social and environmental effects.

The article is organised into five main sections. The next two sections of the paper review the existing literatures on mobility and academic mobility respectively to conceptually frame our original analysis. We then discuss the rigour and robustness of the data and methods used in this study, followed by an analysis and interpretation of these new findings in terms of the different forms of academic mobility, the network capital produced, and role of cooperation between virtual and corporeal mobility. Finally, the concluding section discusses the contributions and the implications of our findings, and puts forward some avenues for further research.

Conceptual considerations

The existing literature on work-related mobility approaches the topic from different angles. One approach, more common in transportation and management studies, considers mobility to be functional, a necessary evil to do work beyond a spatial fix. Mobility is, then, considered a practice that is undertaken, for example, to carry out intra-firm management functions (e.g. visiting subsidiaries), to secure and complete assignments, to negotiate and sign agreements with distant partners, or to produce custom-made services for clients (for summaries of such work see, Beaverstock et al, 2009; Jones 2007; Lyons 2013). The task at hand determines the duration of

mobility, which results in a corporate 'mobility portfolio' specific to a firm or industry (Millar and Salt 2008). In its most rigid definition, business mobility is considered to be 'briefcase travel' by employees in the course of their business to engage in face-to-face meetings (Mackie et al. 2003). Such a definition alludes to the fact that the effectiveness of a trip can be measured by the economic value it generates. In turn, travel is deemed predictable and manageable, and policies can be implemented to rationalize its costs, for example by substituting part of it by videoconferencing technologies (Denstadli et al. 2012; Julsrud et al. 2014).

A different perspective which informs our empirical analysis is closely aligned with the mobilities paradigm developed by Sheller and Urry (2006). It puts 'the social into travel' by starting off from 'the complex patterning of people's varied and changing social activities' (Urry 2003, 155-156). Face-to-face proximity and social activities are considered vital characteristics of much formal and informal social life. On specific occasions, and intermittently, people can feel a strong urge to spend (social) time together with others in specific places, referred to as a 'compulsion to proximity' (Boden and Molotch 1994). To give a clear-cut example of such an urge, people undeniably feel a compulsion to attend weddings and funerals of close friends and family. Urry (2003; 2004a) coined the concept of 'meetingness' to refer to 'meetings' in a wider sense, that is, not only as formal professional assemblies, 'but also [as] informal contingent meetings that happen in all sorts of more informal practices around friendship and family' (Urry 2009, 5).

Importantly, meetingness should be understood as an ongoing social process over time. A networked life at a distance requires intermittent corporeal encounters, 'both to 'establish' and to 'cement' at least temporarily those weak ties' (Urry 2003, 161). It incorporates various means of transcending distance, for example through virtual (via technologies, such as mobile phones and computers) or imaginary mobility (Urry 2002; 2007), as well as corporeal mobility. Thus, when viewed as an ongoing process, it is hard to measure the value of a single trip. Instead, the social value of ecologies of mobility (Faulconbridge et al. 2009) need to be appreciated, explained, and situated in the socio-economic lives of those studied.

For business travellers, it is the socially embedded or 'relational' nature of economic activity (Granovetter 1985; Yeung 2005) that gives rise to demand for, and must therefore be incorporated into any explanation of mobility. For instance, it has been shown that firms can gain benefits from 'clustering temporarily' (Rallet and Torre 1999; Maskell et al. 2005) or by ensuring employees in spatially dispersed subsidiaries are networked and able to collaborate (Faulconbridge 2006; Jones 2007). In both cases, intensive human mobility is a prerequisite. However, as Grabher and Ibert

(2006) note, such analyses tend to commit an ecological fallacy by confounding interpersonal relationships with inter-firm links, thereby neglecting the intricacies and varieties of professional networks of individual workers. The extensive literature on communities of practice (Wenger 1998) or networks of practice (Brown and Duguid 2000) has shown that work-related networks that emerge without much corporate support are essential for our understanding of the firm and its success. Moreover, several authors have argued that extensive interpersonal and networked ties beyond the organizational frame of reference are becoming increasingly important career assets (Defilippi and Arthur 1996; Arthur 2003). This conceptual recasting implies that studies of mobility should not be conducted within a single organizational framework, but should also focus on employees' preferences, contexts and backgrounds and the way these influence their professional networks. Hence, rather than focus on organizational mobility portfolios, the major contribution of this article is that it will explore networked mobility obligations and expectations that are highly individual (Collin 1998).

Professional networks outside of the firm are vital for globally operating knowledge workers because knowledge production and reproduction are in essence social practices (see, Brown and Duguid 2000; Faulconbridge et al. 2009). As Grabher and Ibert (2006) show in their empirical analysis of project ecologies in software and advertising firms, three types of networks, characterized by different degrees of social embeddedness, matter to knowledge workers: communality, sociality, and connectivity networks. Communality ties refer to thick, personal relations, based on mutual experience and common history, while sociality ties are rather informal and career-oriented (Grabher and Ibert 2006; Wittel 2001). Connectivity ties are the 'socially thinnest and culturally most neutral', and focus on the subject matter of a particular project (Grabher and Ibert 2006, 263). Although they do not explicitly refer to the concept of 'meetingness', their analysis indicates that these networks rely on different types of mobility, primarily corporeal in the case of communality and sociality networks and above all virtual in the case of connectivity networks.

In an effort to further develop understanding of the relationships between meetingness and the networks crucial for knowledge workers, this article focuses on academics and their obligations of mobility. The academic sector is generally recognized for having a high degree of tacit knowledge (Storper and Venables 2004) and a mobile workforce (Lassen 2006; Parker and Weik 2014). In addition, in contrast to workers in many other sectors, academics have a relatively high degree of freedom and independence to reap mobility opportunities, or to challenge the difficulties in light of their own context, motivations and ideas. Studying academics should, therefore, provide an

insightful way to understand the processual nature of meetingness, the way corporeal and virtual mobility cooperate (Aguiléra et al. 2012; Haynes 2010), and the network forms that are produced by and generate obligations of presence.

Networks, mobility and work in the academic sector

A number of intersecting global and regional trends have transformed the nature of academia during the last few decades, four seeming especially pertinent for our analysis of academic mobility and networks in this article. First, transnational collaboration and competition are increasingly valued and strengthened by the neoliberal 'internationalization-cum-benchmarking' discourse in higher education (Yeung 2001). The mobility of students and staff lies at the heart of these processes (Kim 2010; Williams et al. 2004). Meanwhile, *not* engaging in corporeal mobility is perceived to be problematic (Parker & Weik 2014; Storme et al. 2013).

Second, universities are centre stage in globalized, knowledge-intensive service economies (Altbach et al. 2009). They are increasingly seen as potential engines of regional economic growth because of their capacity to generate both highly skilled people and innovative research (Rutten et al. 2003). As a consequence, there is a trend towards more 'entrepreneurial', 'strategic' and 'market-led' behaviour of institutions, departments and individual academics (Etzkowitz 2001). Universities move towards the 'logic' of private companies, providing resources in return for production and performance objectives (Enders and Musselin 2008). This performance of individuals, departments and universities is partly ranked and evaluated based on bibliometric data[2] (Adler and Harzing 2009; Frey 2003). In some institutional contexts, including the ones in Flanders and Denmark, which form the empirical background for this study, this performance partly determines the allocation of funding between institutions of higher education (Debackere and Glänzel 2004).

Closely related, but identified as a third trend, are changing labour conditions. Research groups, particularly in the natural sciences, have gradually come to behave like firm-like entities in the sense that they become highly organized and hierarchically structured, and are competing with others for resources (Etzkowitz 2001; de Boer and Goedegebuure 2001). In this context, it is increasingly common to employ early career researchers on a fixed-term project basis, which entails reduced job security. Accordingly, there is a trend towards more 'boundary-less' careers in which employees show little or no organizational or institutional loyalty (Sennet 2007). They are constantly on the lookout for permanent positions or better job prospects elsewhere. Against this

background, Defillipi and Arthur (1996) stress the importance of personal networks outside the formal work setting because this becomes the only form of stability when a person changes jobs.

Finally, there is an (increasing) abundance of codified knowledge on the Internet. This comprises not only knowledge in the form of peer-reviewed publications in indexed electronic journals[3],but also increasingly more unfinished, often overlapping, sometimes contradictory or outright unreliable, but always fast-changing information sources and channels (Brown and Duguid 2000). This abundance creates challenges for academics, not least of all in terms of sense-making and keeping abreast of the knowledge base within a particular subfield (Billig 2013; Meyer 2010). Similar to other knowledge-intensive sectors, we can expect much of the sense-making and understanding to occur via networked social interaction and 'meetingness' (Faulconbridge 2006; Jones 2007).

Taken together, it is clear that the changing nature of academic work within the last few decades has significant ramifications for mobility. However, to the best of our knowledge, the literature has only recently begun to analyse mobility apart from its traditional, restrictive meaning as isolated and geographical movements such as sabbatical periods abroad (Ackers 2010). In this article, we advance understanding by addressing three interrelated research questions: (i) what do processes of meetingness involve for academics? (ii) what different network compulsions of meetingness exist, and how are these served? (iii) what are the implications of (i) and (ii) for efforts to understand the drivers of and barriers to reducing mobility in the context of its well- known social and environmental costs?

Data and methods

To investigate the underlying mechanisms of academic mobility in depth, 42 semi-structured interviews were carried out. This included academics working at Ghent University (UGent) in Flanders, Belgium (31 interviews, between March 2010 and March 2013), and Aalborg University (AAU), Denmark (11 interviews, August 2013). Both universities are part of higher education systems with considerable similarities, not least with respect to their internationalization strategies (Enders and Musselin 2008). They are located in small high-income countries where international communication, co-operation and recognition are important due to the absence of strong publication networks in their own (regional) language. Academics within these universities form part of the 'super-mobile population of the Global North,' as discussed in the work of Parker and

Weik (2014). Indeed, one can expect diverging mobility patterns and rationales for students and staff from other regions, for example, the mobilities of Chinese scholars (Leung 2012).

The study used a convenience sample, which neither claims to be random nor representative for the total population of academics within these institutions. As such, generalizations to broader populations should be made with great caution. However, replicability and generalisability were not the goals of this study. The emphasis rather lies on discovering and understanding the perspectives and experiences of respondents, which could at a later stage be used to contextualise the findings of more quantitative work (Harwell 2011). We sent interview invitations to heads of department, because they were bound to have experienced shifting mobility demands over time and set out day-to-day research policies. By contacting a range of heads of department we were also able to consider departmental variations in mobility obligations. At later stages, invitations were sent through snowball sampling, with the aim to interview a range of departmental members, including more early career academics. Eleven interviews were carried out at Aalborg University during a research stay in August 2013. The Aalborg interviews looked to confirm what was discovered in the larger Ghent sample. The background characteristics of the respondents are given in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Thirty-one respondents were male, and the age of respondents ranged from 26 to 63 years. Senior staff refers to academics with a 'tenure track' or tenured position, and junior or early career staff refers to (post-)doctoral students, employed under fixed-term conditions. The final sample consists of respondents working across different academic disciplines. All Danish respondents were working at the Faculty of Engineering and Science at Aalborg University at the time of the interview. All respondents, regardless of age or career stage, had already travelled in person for work-related purposes. Their mobility pattern was nonetheless quite diverse with respect to frequency, duration and range. The majority of respondents travelled three to five times a year, each trip lasting at least a couple of days. However, while some academics travelled only once a year, there were also frequent-traveling academics in our sample which engaged in a trip up to twice a month. In terms of spatial range, the mobility geographies appeared to be quite diverse as well.

The interviews were tape-recorded to ensure minimal information loss and lasted on average 59 minutes. The manuscripts were analysed in QSR NVivo 10, which is a software package built for

qualitative data analysis and, more specifically, transcription analysis, coding and text interpretation. The data were coded manually in an iterative process to condense the data and identify key pointers. For example, and in line with Urry's obligations for physical proximity (see, Urry 2003), we identified different obligations and motivations which were manually coded in thematic 'nodes.' This procedure enabled us to index the transcripts and to support the analysis.

Results: the role of academic mobility

A functional perspective on mobility

According to our respondents, one role for mobility was inextricably linked to 'doing research work' elsewhere. This involved studying (i) *objects*, (ii) *places* or (iii) *events* (Urry 2003). The first category includes trips to libraries, machines, laboratories and the like, as illustrated by the following quote: '*Last year, I unexpectedly received an invitation to spend a week in New York to study the diaries and so forth of [famous artist]. I had to change my entire summer schedule to be able to go*' (#34, male, senior). The second category included trips to observatories, landscapes, monuments, buildings, etc. Face-to-place obligations are most evident in the case of fieldwork of a few days or weeks on-site. When it comes to the third category, face-to-event obligations, the trips occur within a particular time frame, for example, during volcano eruptions or cultural ceremonies. The precise goal of the trip depends on the discipline of the academic. The trips have a well-specified rationale and are relatively easy to justify.

Mobility obligations also relate to a particular *institutionally defined* social role. Hardimon (1994, 334) refers to these role obligations as 'a moral requirement, which attaches to an institutional role, whose content is fixed by the function of the role, and whose normative force flows from the role'. By means of example, one of our respondents occupying the role of manager of a transnational project felt obliged to go to a project meeting, as he felt responsible for the project. He considered not going to one of the project meetings, but figured that his absence would be deemed problematic: '*Sometimes I know beforehand: "what am I… What's it going to be this time?" (sigh). But, if I don't go, then there will be no milestones set this time… Somebody has to say: "it's not OK". So that's why I need to go*' (#29, male, senior). Another respondent was appointed president of an international network within a subfield and expressed a need to attend all meetings organized by that network. His presence gives authority to a meeting and increases the likelihood that the gathering will be of importance (Lampel and Meyer 2008). Likewise, when the anticipated

economic gains of a trip are high, a research team manager is expected to "be there", even if it comprises a short meeting and a transatlantic flight: '*I went to the US for half a day […] If there's a meeting of [important global funding agency], then you need to be there. You make sure that you are there because if you're not there, then you're wrong: "les absents ont tort"'* (#20, male, senior).

Developing and sustaining a transnational knowledge network

It was clear from the interviews that beyond functional outcomes – getting research work done and fulfilling institutional roles – meetings also serve other purposes. They often involve relaxing in a pleasant atmosphere outside the everyday work context, like receptions, dinner, coffee breaks, drinks at the bar, tourism and play (Lassen 2006). These are socially significant occasions, offering an opportunity to *'really get to know each other'* (#1, female, senior) or to catch up on earlier conversations in the past. The following respondent emphasizes that such socializing simply has to happen outside the normal work setting, away from the everyday routines:

> *'[A]t least once a year or maybe twice a year, we try to meet. But, it's not only to meet the people from [the other city], it also to be out of office, and have a nice meal, walk in the forest or along the beach, to socialize. Because… also here, OK. You don't get to know people if you haven't been spending time informally. So once or twice a year, we go somewhere else. It's not staying here, it's staying somewhere else'* (#14, male, senior).

Urry (2004a, 30) refers to such places as 'neutral territory'. As is clear from many conference announcements, the 'exotic' aspect of the venue also matters. Many respondents made clear that they arrived a few days earlier or stayed a little longer to spend some time in the city or in its wider surroundings, which clearly relates to the well-known blurring between business and leisure travel (Davidson and Cope 2003).

Nonetheless, of significance in the context of the above discussions on the relationship between obligations of presence, professional networks and knowledge work, our data suggest that by far the most important consideration relating to corporeal mobility is the way meetings enable the developing and sustaining of a transnational network that goes hand in hand with the changing academic work practices described earlier. There was evidence that increased specialization within locally embedded research teams makes internal, local knowledge sharing increasingly insufficient, as exemplified by the following quote: *'In your own research group, you are the specialist and internal conversations are not always far-reaching. This can be solved through communicating*

with external experts in your field' (#18, male, junior). Therefore, an academic is expected to combine both formal and informal communication processes: *'Somebody who can combine… being active [in publishing] and being visible from time to time… is according to me doing a very good job. That's… Yes. You have to be able to tell what you're doing. And if you're merely writing stuff, you have a much higher risk that someone will misunderstand you… I think many brilliant ideas were rejected or at least curbed this way [by journal reviewers]'* (#12, male, senior).

Meetings are, then, crucial and instantaneous sources of privileged, complementary and informal information and knowledge, vis-à-vis more slower and formal publication mechanisms retrieved via the World Wide Web. A peer-reviewed article is passive, finished and codified knowledge that conforms to the norms and demands of a journal. Talking about work on an informal basis makes it a two-way process that welcomes active involvement and feedback. Many respondents said that they received new inspiration, insights and ideas from conversations with colleagues, which sped up their progress and productivity: *'Without these meetings, you can gain few new ideas and your progress is hampered. Mobility and networking make research and publications possible'* (#4, male, junior). This corresponds with the discussion above of knowledge production and reproduction as social practices, our interviewees describing how meetings allowed the performance of these practices.

For the remainder of this paper we therefore make an empirically grounded distinction between two different types of meetings, the networks they help to produce, and their significance for academic knowledge work. There are, in particular, differences between the 'social goods' (Urry 2004b, 117) that are exchanged in the two types of meeting, and in terms of the social mechanisms that are associated with these meetings.

Meetings and the production of sparse and dense networks

First, we identify the role of sparse networks and the meetings associated with them. Sparse networks involve developing a broad array of relationships, generating what Granovetter (1973) long ago described as the strength of weak ties. Meetings that produce sparse networks are, therefore, those that allow encounters between individuals with diverse backgrounds (culturally and scientifically). Such meetings are often also attended by (powerful) third parties, such as publishers, editors or funding agencies. They are often organized by international associations, open for all to participate – although it is common to pay an attendance fee – and they encompass

an entire field of study (e.g., across a discipline such as geography or sociology). The majority of attendees join these meeting to both build new and interact with existing weak ties who are not formally collaborated with or part of the dense networks we discuss below.

A second category of meetings allows highly connected dense social networks to be built and reenergised. Members of these networks know (before or after the meeting) each other quite well and develop collaborative relationships that are sustained over time. Meetings are often more informal, based upon invitations sent around by the organizers, are smaller in scale, and costs for transportation and accommodations are often reimbursed. They do not encompass an entire field of study, but revolve around smaller circles of friends. Examples would be small research seminars, and meetings of working groups.

We recognise that the two network structures outlined above can emerge and be reproduced at times through the same meetings. For example, dense social networks often get reproduced at meetings such as conferences which are primarily associated with sparse networks. Indeed, networks evolve through time as sparse can be transformed into dense and vice versa, which hampers a clear demarcation. However, it is insightful to make this analytical distinction between network structures and the kinds of meetings associated with them, because it allows an understanding to emerge of the different benefits gained from different types of network and associated meeting. This also relates to how the two network forms are also constructed differently and compel presence for different reasons. We consider these differences in the remainder of this section of the paper.

Meetings of sparse professional networks and strategic visibility

Obligations of presence at sparse network meetings relate to the opportunities to create ties with previously unknown people and to tap into new resources. Mitchell et al. (1999) developed the notion of 'planned happenstance' in career theory to emphasize the relevance of chance events. What matters according to them, is not actively striving for a particular result, but rather, the ad hoc seizing of an opportunity that comes along by engaging in activities. Engaging in sparse network meetings appears to be quite similar, because the return of a trip is hard to predict beforehand. It depends on the presence (and power) of other attendees, the emergence of opportunities to interact during the meeting, and is not associated with instant opportunities or guaranteed returns on investment of time, money, carbon emissions etc. Nonetheless, 'being there' is seen as crucial to an academic's success in a global knowledge labour market.

Some respondents mentioned the 'surprise' effect of sparse meetings, arguing that such events offer the opportunity to meet people whom you have never heard of before, but are doing work similar to yours. In fact, this 'bumping into each other' appears to be organized and cultivated by event organizers, who create the best conditions for maximum 'mingling' between attendees: *'so you make these long lunch breaks and you have these too little tables and standing tables, so small cocktail-like and you have to walk around and mingle. It's even nice if there is a queue, because… then you start talking to the one in front. So it's better than sitting around a nice table and being served at your seat. Because then you're fixed. So it's through constant movement, that you are introduced by someone: 'ooh, you have to meet this guy, may I introduce …''* (#14, male, senior).

This 'bumping' produces the main opportunity of sparse network meetings: the gathering of new knowledge. Searching for inspiration through the Net proves to be rather path-dependent: '*When you sit behind your computer, and watch your screen, then you no longer get surprised. You always look in the direction you are used to. And I think in that sense an important function is attributed to conferences. You hear new things, you hear new arguments you've never thought about before […] Few people read articles in the context of: 'I am going to read something about…' No, today, people read articles bearing their own publication in mind'* (#33, male, senior). By listening to a presentation or participating in a conversation on an unexplored or unfamiliar topic, one might discover a new idea, technique, research method, etc. One of the respondents compared it to listening to a radio instead of an iPod: '*Suddenly you hear something that you wouldn't have tuned into if you had compiled your own playlist from the Internet. So, it broadens your scope and keeps the curiosity*' (#14, male, senior).

Moreover, these meetings provide a quick and easy overview of a particular topic or network. It is obviously valuable for someone working in a field to have an idea of where the newest developments take place and to feel the 'pulse' of what is going on, but it simultaneously allows academics working on short-term projects or contracts to quickly become acquainted with the field, to locate and penetrate the most recent knowledge about an unknown topic. One of the respondents, for example, liked the serendipitous character of poster presentations for this reason: '*a poster often depicts the newest findings, which have not been published before. And within half an hour, you have seen forty posters. I then immediately put their mail address in my PDA, attach a standard mail more or less saying "send it to me" and I receive a hundred posters*' (#29, male, senior).

Attendance at sparse network meetings is, then, in part motivated by the new awareness and connections that might be generated by happening upon the research of others. It is impossible to engage in conversations with all participants, but awareness of their work can emerge. Similarly, attendance is also aimed at one's own 'visibility' to people 'outside' one's everyday community. According to many respondents, increasing visibility might augment publication opportunities. Presenting your research and skills in front of the gatekeepers of publication channels —namely journal editors— may result in publication opportunities. In a commentary in *Nature*, Lawrence (2003) referred to the practice as 'courting editors.' Editors—especially from leading journals—have the challenging task of determining what is worth peer-review amidst the abundance of manuscript submissions, and their evaluation might be influenced by previous 'authentic' contact. In addition, being visible at sparse network meetings also feeds a self-reproducing cycle of visibility: *'you have to make sure that you connect with the right people to get cited and to receive new articles. And this has today more importance than the quality of your research and publications. You have to have seen the right people at the right time at the right place'* (#34, male, senior).

As the quote above suggests, feelings towards 'strategic visibility' are mixed: *'[T]here is a lot of conference mobility that is a waste of time. […]if it's in order to help career planning in order to find somebody who will say that you are a good guy and make a good evaluation, when you make an application, then it's useful for the person, but not for society'* (#11, male, senior); *'Our director thinks I do much too little on my visibility. I feel sick to my stomach when I merely hear the word… In my opinion: I'm doing a good job already'* (#38, female, senior). Several respondents mentioned they were not very keen on augmenting their personal visibility, because they considered such practices to be anti-academic (see also, Lawrence, 2003). However, untenured and early career researchers, as "entrepreneurs of their own careers", need this visibility to increase job chances, which has been referred to by one of the interviewees as 'pushing your luck' (#4, male, junior): Becoming known and recognized within the wider research community as a talented and able person makes people with a job vacancy eager to notify you with their job positions personally. One respondent emphasized that in such a context, meeting attendance '*provides them [early career researchers] the opportunity to make their grain of sand develop into a desert rose*' (#29, male, senior).

Meetings of dense professional networks and reciprocal dependencies

Obligations of presence at dense network meetings relate to the need to produce and reproduce close professional and personal relationships (see, Urry 2003). Although not all professional relationships are obviously 'friendships', friendships are the most common of those interpersonal relationships. Meeting obligations originating from friendships are quite different from the institutionally defined role obligations, because they depend on the individuals who constitute them (see, Hardimon 1994). As Hardimon (1994) explains, the structures of friendships are less well defined, are less formal and more elastic than those of institutions. This was clear from the way our respondents had a hard time explaining why they needed to engage in specific trips. For certain trips, there was no clear motivation, apart from 'seeing the other again'. However, this does not imply that the normative expectations of meeting cannot be strong (Urry 2004a, 31).

A significant amount of academic mobility is, then, an outcome of informal, morally significant, and dense social networks. Crane (1972) already referred to circles of befriended colleagues working within a particular subfield and named these 'invisible colleges': 'a communication network of a subgroup of researchers within an area' (Crane 1972, 35). Such networks are small enough to allow dense, all-channel interpersonal communication between its distributed members. This informal and face-to-face exchange of information and knowledge has become fundamental, partly because of the new challenges generated by ubiquitous information sources on the Web (Brown and Duguid 2000). Asheim et al. (2007) emphasised that in the case of such an analytical and formal knowledge base, it becomes a matter of retrieving the information first, before everyone else can. As a consequence, this paper suggests – in line with Burt (2000) – that much of the sense-making and information sharing seems to occur at these social meetings, through informal communication mechanisms. These mechanisms include judgments, narratives, stories and news, and circulate first-hand within dense groups. Face-to-face interaction is vital, because it allows for complex, and highly situated 'translation' mechanisms which cannot easily be copied through virtual mobility or the use of ICTs. Participation in such social meetings is, then, important for increasing 'know-why': '*as a researcher, you are very often working on your own. Just the fact that you see that others are also working on that topic, you need that somehow*' (#33, male, senior).

Dense professional networks thrive on hospitality and reciprocity, this being associated with the organising and hosting meetings on the one hand, and accepting such meeting invitations on the other hand. They also thrive on the 'social' time spent engaging in activities outside work (drinking, eating, sports, sightseeing, etc.) which helps to reaffirm and strengthen ties (Urry 2003): *'In Malaysia, we played badminton. So being together and doing something else and… She had kids*

and we have kids of the same age and so… Also sometimes staying in the family house, we did that over there and she did that with a colleague at our place, so…' (#14, male, senior). One of the respondents even argued that her physical mobility increasingly had social goals: *'As often as it is economically and practically possible, I come here primarily for the social reasons. For example, if I am here for a one-day meeting, quite often I come the day before or stay one day longer. And then I sleep overnight at one of my colleagues' place. So I spend some time on continuing the relationships, because I think it's important to do that'* (#24, female, senior).

Although dense network meetings are often time-consuming and not always – or hardly ever for the busy academic – easy to fit into plans, invitees somehow feel compelled to accept these invitations or at least have a hard time declining. Both sending such invitations and accepting them are informal and covert ways of recognising and rewarding the work of others, and further reaffirming relationships. Moreover, by accepting such invitations, one tacitly commits oneself 'to offering the return service and therefore enters into a circuit of continuous exchanges' (Bourdieu 1988, 97). Social meetings in dense social networks are important to build trust, to generate understanding, to test new claims, and to secure informal recognition and support. As such, Sennet (2007, 80) explained that these 'strong networks constitute a safety net which diminishes the need for long-term strategic planning'. A member can fully be immersed in the present or 'on top of things' when access to such networks is secured.

Negotiating presence and absence

The discussion above reveals the obligations of presence at sparse and dense network meetings, and the associated visibility and reciprocity benefits accrued from 'being there'. Some respondents, however, explained that there are situations in which corporeal presence and meetingness need to be negotiated. Maintaining a remote social life at a distance increases the likelihood of *overlapping and conflicting meeting obligations*. Virtual mobility proves in some scenarios to be a viable alternative to corporeal mobility when obligations conflict (see also, Haynes 2010), but is not a substitute. Rather, it is a collaborating means of achieving presence between corporeal mobility for some types of obligation of presence.

For instance, the following respondent noted how they fulfilled what we earlier called 'functional' obligations of presence associated with institutionally defined roles through virtual means due to conflicting obligations of presence: *'Even now, I was in India and still. Our research group was in*

the midst of a dispute over resources with [another university]. Well then… That has to happen via the telephone. That is… The job… You can't avoid that' (#29, male, senior). Some of the respondents thought about meetings not only in terms of the length and number of times they must be present, but also about the moments they can remain *absent*. This is especially true for senior and powerful academics. Presence and absence are even negotiated when taking on particular roles. One respondent stated:

> *The fact that I'm also president of [Institutional Board]… when the rector asked me to do this, I said: "no, I will not be able to do that job properly." And he still asked for my conditions to take up this role anyway. And then my conditions were that I as a president could – when it really mattered, for the most essential management duties – chair the meeting, but when it concerned other tasks, that members of the Board could replace me*' (#32, male, senior).

However, it was also clear that in every situation of conflict, a decision had to be made about which obligations of presence to service via corporeal mobility, and which to service via virtual mobility or to simply be absent from, as illustrated by this quote: '*Once a year, we have an on-site meeting with our industrial partners, followed by a dinner. Well, so much more happens during those events. You can check on things, which are simply not done during a telephone conference. Teleconferences do not allow you to deviate from the norm. You will not take any risks'* (#8, female, junior).

Importantly, for dense networks, not all consecutive get-togethers need to happen face-to-face: *'I think it's OK to say, well, we don't need to meet physically each month, but we should meet twice a year, something like that'* (#24, female, junior). Indeed, many academics interviewed had access to fully equipped videoconference technologies and used them to maintain strong ties between corporeal mobility. Virtual mobility is thus transforming everyday work arrangements: *'we are quite free when to work and where to work from and we have… Good access from home. Just before you came here, I supervised an Icelandic student via Skype. So some of these overseas supervisions, I take that at home, in the morning, the afternoon or in the evening. It's very flexible, it's not that you have to be at the office from eight to five'* (#24, female, senior). As a consequence of such arrangements, there might well be a tendency to engage in physical mobility mainly for the informal, social get-togethers, under playful circumstances, whereas virtual meetings are organized to effectively get things done (Urry 2009).

In terms of sparse network meetings, the dynamic was more complex. Several respondents raised the point that conversations at conferences quickly become too informal, and as such 'being there' is important for visibility and building new weak ties, but may lead to the greatest gain when coupled to later virtual mobility. One respondent (#27, female, senior) described this as involving it being sufficient to shortly introduce yourself and your research at a sparse network meeting, before following up virtually after the meeting with more specific requests. Importantly, though, unlike dense network meetings, attendance at a sparse meeting can be less easily completed virtually. Whilst some virtual conferences have emerged, for academics 'being there' at the event remains crucial, and at times of conflict between obligations of presence it becomes a question of whether one wants to participate or not in the sparse network meeting, a decision to participate meaning a commitment to corporeal mobility.

Concluding discussion

This article provides a unique exploration of academic mobility, as experienced in two institutions of higher education. The first question we sought to address through our analysis relates to the processes of mobility and meetingness associated with academics work. Both have been shown to be socially significant practices that play important roles in the activities of academic knowledge workers who perform in global disciplinary fields. Corporeal mobility allows for presence at objects, places and events, and the fulfilling of institutionally defined social roles. Presence at meetings is even more important, allowing network capital accumulation (Urry 2004b) that supports knowledge work. Our second question related to the different network compulsions of meetingness, and how they are served. We have shown here that networks exist in both dense and sparse forms, each being associated with particular types of meeting and bringing different benefits in terms of academic knowledge work. The key features of each network type are summarized in Table 2. In particular we have shown that visibility generated through presence at sparse network meetings provides the foundations for the success of academics, whilst reciprocity generated through dense network meetings allows research to be executed and new knowledge frontiers pushed. As such, sparse and dense professional networks which exist in addition to the inter-firm relations often examined in studies of business travel, and the meetings that produce them, are equally important and play interdependent roles in academic knowledge work. Ultimately, therefore, the need for both dense and sparse networks creates obligations of proximity at a range of types of meetings, from large conferences to small workshops and associated social events. Hence, many work-related

obligations require a certain flexibility, fitness or potential to be mobile, which has been referred to as 'motility' (Kaufmann et al. 2004).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Our third question related to the implications of the insights gained from addressing the first two questions for efforts to understand the drivers of and barriers to reducing mobility in the context of its well- known social and environmental costs. It is widely reported that academic work is likely to interfere with private obligations. This may lead to people feeling constrained to mobility during particular life and career phases, for example, when caring obligations are high or job duties at the home institution are demanding (Storme et al., 2013). It is not a coincidence, then, that academics tend to postpone either family or mobility obligations. Such concerns have been raised in the research of Ackers (2008) and Leemann (2010) for long-term academic mobility and in Parker and Weik (2014) for short-term academic mobility. Meanwhile, the environmental impacts of hyper-mobile academics cannot be ignored. In this context, our analysis is significantly important because it shows that virtual mobility does not provide a substitute for corporeal mobility, and to date has not acted as a means of solving the problems associated with the demand for academic mobility. Instead, virtual mobility allows 'the best of both worlds' through a rational combination of corporeal and virtual mobility when conflicts arise and obligations of presence at multiple locations exist. Theoretically, we understand this to be a result of the processual nature of meetingness, with the production and reproduction of the networks discussed above occurring through different types of meeting, some of which can only be attended through corporeal mobility, others which can be participated in virtually. This suggests, then, that the cooperation between corporeal and virtual mobility is crucial to allow academics to 'be there' when it is the only way to participate, but to also juggle conflicting obligations of presence through virtual involvement in those meetings that are accessible in such a way.

There are a number of limitations to our study. First, as suggested by Enders and Musselin (2008), the concept of an 'academic profession' may be an illusion. For example, we can easily assume that mobility occurs under different conditions in 'entrepreneurial' disciplines vis-à-vis 'intellectual' disciplines. Academics from the former disciplines produce commercial and marketable knowledge in the form of patents and spin-offs (Etzkowitz 2001) and may be less interested in the role of informal communication, for example. How these differences work out in practice may therefore be the focus of further research. Next, our exploratory research design has limitations because

'snowballing' and drawing on personal contacts make generalizing to the wider academic population problematic. The selection of host countries was, to some extent, based on the institutions where one of the authors was working, which facilitated access. Given that the study thus only focuses on Belgian and Danish academics, the findings presented here may not be applicable to other (and particularly non-European) contexts.

Nonetheless, the originality of this research opens up a variety of new questions to address in the future. Undoubtedly, the role of virtual mobility can be studied in more depth. More specifically, it would be interesting to explore the phenomenon of 'virtual visibility' more thoroughly because only a limited number of respondents referred to practices such as academic blogging, use of social media, personal websites, etc. Can this substitute to some extent for the need to 'be there' at sparse network meetings? In addition, it seems important to examine the evolution of networks: how do sparse networks become dense, and can evolutions happen in the opposite direction? What are the implications of evolutions for obligations of presence? It would also be productive to explore the wider institutional context of higher education to further elaborate on the pressures that underlie demand for mobility. How do these lead to virtual mobility only substituting for corporeal mobility when conflicts between obligations of presence exist? Does this relate to expectations of mobility, promotion processes, and peer pressure? How might the institutional environment of higher education enable virtual mobility to become both a means of dealing with conflict and a more legitimate alternative to 'being there'? Finally, the potential uneven adherence of academics to obligations of presence, and more particularly gendered patterns of network involvement, are an interesting avenue for further research.

[1] Academics are defined as the employees of an institution of higher education who research and/or teach as part of their occupation. They consist of PhD students, postdoctoral students, lecturers and professors.

[2] Bibliometric data refers to publications and citations in international, peer-reviewed and preferably 'leading' journals.

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	UGent sample	AAU sample	Total	% of total
N	31	11	42	100.0
Sex				
Male	23	8	31	73.8
Female	8	3	11	26.2
Faculty position				
Junior staff	8	6	14	33.3
Senior staff	23	5	28	66.7
Age class				
[20,30[	5	1	6	14.3
[30,40[	8	7	15	35.7
[40,50[	9	1	10	23.8
[50,60[	5	1	6	14.3
[60,70[	4	1	5	11.9
Discipline				
Humanities and social sciences	9	0	9	21.4
Formal and natural sciences	13	11	33	78.6
Applied sciences	9			

Table 1. Background characteristics of interview respondents.

	Sparse network meetings	Dense network meetings
Main characteristics	Large in scope - organized by international associations Open for all to participate (although attendance fee is likely) Broad array of professional ties	Small in scope - organized by network members Attendance upon invitation (travel and accommodation costs often reimbursed) Limited number of professional and personal ties
Social mechanisms	Strategic visibility Ad hoc seizing of opportunities Feeling the pulse of an entire field	Hospitality and reciprocity Long-lasting collaboration Sense-making and sharing
Social goods	Serendipitous and novel resources Career opportunities	First-hand knowledge circulation Trust, informal recognition and support Professional identity

Table 2. Summary of key features of each network type.